DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 634 HE 018 515

AUTHOR Hossler, Don
TITLE A Research Overview of Student College Choice. ASHE 1985 Annual Meeting Paper.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (Chicago, IL, March 15-17, 1985).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Attendance; *College Choice; Decision Making; *Enrollment Influences; Family Influence; Higher Education; *Information Needs; Marketing; Models; Student Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting

ABSTRACT

A three-stage model of college choice is outlined, and research related to the model is reviewed. The first phase is a developmental one in which students determine whether they would like to attend college. For students entering postsecondary studies, the second stage involves gathering information about educational options. The third state is the selection of a college. Research has indicated that the decision about attending college is affected by: student and family background characteristics, attitudes and aspirations, significant others, and high school characteristics. During the search stage written information about colleges, campus visits, and admissions/recruitment activities help students choose a school. The search process may also be influenced by parental income, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, and college geographic location. Type and amount of scholarship aid can also affect student matriculation. Both the search and choice phases are characterized by increasing interaction between the student and colleges. It is noted that understanding the process of student college choice has implications for college marketing efforts. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED259634

A RESEARCH OVERVIEW OF STUDENT COLLEGE CHOICE

Don Hossler
Asst. Professor
Programs in Higher Education
Loyola University of Chicago
Association for the Study of Higher Education
March 17, 1985
Chicago, IL

HE 018 515

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Don Hossler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ASHE Association for the Study of Higher Education
The George Washington University/One Dupont Circle, Suite 630/Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 296-2597

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, March 15-17, 1985. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

A RESEARCH OVERVIEW OF STUDENT COLLEGE CHOICE

Overview

During the last decade the topic of student college choice has been attracting more and more interest. This interest has been driven by a number of issues. At the state and federal level, public policy issues related to student financial aid and the debate over educational excellence have stimulated interest in the process of student college choice. At the institutional level, growing competition for a declining pool of students has ushered in an era of market oriented research which focuses on student college choice as a means of developing more effective marketing strategies.

This paper will review the research which has been emerging on this topic as a means of setting the stage for the papers which will follow. I will begin by outlining a three stage choice model which is a synthesis of several models which have been proposed. This will be followed by a review of research findings related to this three stage model.

Student College Choice Models

Several models of student college choice have been suggested (D. Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; R. Chapman, 1984). Each of these models reflect the interactive and developmental nature of the

choice process. Both Jackson and Litten suggest that the process has three phases. The first phase can be characterized as a developmental stage in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school.

(SEE OVERHEAD NO. 1)

This first phase might be called the predisposition phase. For those students who wish to enter a college or university the second stage is a period during which they gather information about educational options.

(SEE OVERHEAD NO. 2)

R. Chapman has labeled this phase, the "search" phase (p. 1). He descibes the search phase as follows: "...searching for the attribute values which characterize the college alternatives...(and) may also entail learning about and identifying the right attributes to consider" (p. 1). During the search phase students will formulate what Jackson (1982) has called a "choice set" (p. 239). The choice set is the group of institutions which the students will actually apply to. The third stage is that of choice, that is the deciding as to which college or university students will actually enter.

(SEE OVERHEAD NO. 3)

It must be remembered that throughout these phases students may, at any time, choose a non-educational alternative.

D. Chapman's model (1981), also adds to our understanding of student college choice. Although each of the models recognizes the interactive nature of the choice process, D. Chapman's work illustrates

this more so than other models. He notes that the types of institutions available for the student to consider, and the communication strategies utilized by these institutions will influence the choice set and the final decision. The size, price, academic programs, distance, and campus environment of the institutions in a student's choice set can affect the ultimate choice.

These models form the constructs for our discussion of student college choice. We will now examine research on college choice within the framework of these three phases - predisposition, search and choice.

Predisposition

The predisposition phase has received the least attention of any of the stages we will discuss today. However, we do know that certain background characterisitcs are correlated with college attendance. These background characteristics are cumulative, exerting their influence over time.

One of the most important background characteristics is that of socioeconomic status (Trent, 1970; Kohn, Manski and Mundel, 1976; Miller, 1976; Bishop, 1977; Peters, 1977). Dugan (1972) concludes that SES has a cumulative effect throughout preschooling and the formal years of schooling. Peters (1977) finds that high SES students are four times more likely to go to college than low SES students (p. 9). As SES rises so does the likelihood of going to college.

Parents undoubtedly have an impact on this predisposition phase.

Conklin and Dailey (1981) report findins a direct relationship betweeen the amount of parental encouragement and subsequent college attendance. In fact, Conklin and Dailey show that as the amount of encouragement rises, the likelihood of attending a four year selective college as opposed to a two year institution or a non-selective four year campus also increases. A recent Pennsylvania study (Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Universities, 1984) and Litten, Sullivan and Brodigan's (1983) market research study of the applicant pool of Carleton College also note the importance of parents in student college choice. Murphy (1981) examines choice variables for high school students and parents and finds that approximately 50% of both groups indicate that parents first initiated the idea of going to college.

Along with SES and parental influence, the ability and educational experiences of the students also affects the predisposition phase. Research has consistently demonstrated that as student ability rises, so does the likelihood of attending college (Trent, 1970; Kohn, Manski and Mundel, 1976; Peters, 1977; Manski and Wise, 1983). Although not as important as the variables already discussed, the quality of a student's educational experience also effects the choice process (Alexander, 1978; Harnqvist, 1978; Kolstad, 1979). Students attending higher quality high schools, even when ability levels and achievement are held constant, are still more likely to attend college.

At some point in the educational experience, students decide whether or not to consider going to college. Murphy's (1981) data from a retrospective study show that more than 70% of a sample of high

school students in Milwaukee first considered going to college when they were in grade school (p. 143). A non-matched set of parents, however, differed. Most of these parents estimate that their children first considered going to college during the freshman and sophomore years (Murphy, 1981, p. 143). In any case, as early as the freshman year in high school, and in most cases certainly by the senior year, prospective college matriculants enter the search phase.

Search

Jackson (1978, p. 571) suggests that two types of students enter this next phase - search. The first type are the "whiches", those students who will definitely enter a college or university, the only question is where they will go. The other type, the "whethers", those who are considering going to college, but are still weighing non-educational options as well. It is during the search phase that the interactive nature of college choice becomes more apparent.

During this stage, potential matriculants are seeking more information about colleges and universities. D. Chapman's model (1981) suggests that college communication strategies such as written information, campus visits, and admissions/recruitment activities help during the search phase help to determine the ultimate choice set of each student. Despite the activities of this search phase evidence appears to reveal that expectations about college are inaccurate and that accurate information is often ignored (Stern, 1965; Jackson, 1982). We must be careful, however, several studies demonstrate that

there appears to be some logic in the way students construct their choice sets (Tierney, 1980; Litten, Sullivan, and Brodigan, 1983; Zemsky and Oedel, 1983). We may simply not have found a conceptual approach to studying college choice which adequately captures the logic employed by potential matriculants.

It is in this phase that students settle upon a choice set. After examining the search phase both Ihlanfeldt (1980) and Litten, Sullivan and Brodigan (1983) report that high ability students tend to conduct a more sophisticated search process. Supporting such conclusions, the work of Zemsky and Oedel (1983) reveals that as the SAT scores and income level of potential matriculants falls, they narrow the geographical range and the quality of the institutions they consider. For some of these students this may mean that if there are no institutions that fall within their localized search, which meet their expectations for a desireable college, they may choose a non-college option. This may happen despite the fact that there are appropriate institutions for them if they were to broaden their search. In his review of the search phase, Litten (1982) finds that black students, students from low incomes or students who have parents with less education, conduct searches which take longer and are less efficient. They are also more likely to rely on high school counselors for advice.

There is perhaps, no area where the lack of accurate information is more evident and more critical than that of the cost of college attendance. Students typically lack accurate information about the true costs of attendance. As a result they exclude some institutions

from their choice sets on the basis of list price rather than net price (Elliott, 1980; Jackson, 1982; The College Board, 1976). Similiarly, some students who might be eligible for financial aid never apply because they did not believe they were eligible (Packer, 1980). If some colleges and universities hope to expand the pool of potential matriculants communicating the net price of attendance to various market segments is a vital issue to deal with.

It is important to emphasize that the lack of clear information and well-defined search activities does not mean that everyone who opts for a non-educational option during the search stage was a potential college attender. As Manski and Wise (1982) point out, many low income students do not enjoy college and would be unlikely to go to college under any circumstances. The more pervasive problem during this phase is that many students needlessley limit the number and types of institutions in their choice set. They may mistakenly eliminate an institution which is potentially the best choice for them. This can lead to a lack of satisfaction and non-persistence.

Choice

Following the search stage, students move to the third phase of the choice process. At the outset of this stage the choice set is evaluated. This enables students to narrow their choice to a specific institution which each one will enter. A choice set may range from one institution to several. One of the problems of studying this phase is that it is difficult to gather accurate information on the number of

applications students submit because of the variety institutions and the sources of application information. The lack of a comprehensive data base on student applications makes it difficult to study the application patterns of some student segments. Green (1982) notes that the number of applications per student is on the rise according to CIRP data. ACT and SAT data are also often cited to support the claim of multiple applications. On the other hand, many community colleges do not require either of these tests, and non-traditional students and those matriculants attending community colleges are least likely to be a part of the CIRP data base. As a result we cannot determine actual application numbers. Although it seems safe to conclude that the number of multiple applications is increasing, the extent of the increase is unknown. If we cannot be sure of the number of applications each student submits the problem of studying the evaluation of choice sets becomes evident.

The interactive nature of the process during the choice phase is again seen. College communication strategies and net price become more important. Manski and Wise (1983) and Jackson (1978) show that net price, as opposed to list price, does influence the enrollment decision. Jackson (1978) does show that receiving any financial aid increases the likelihood a student will attend. Interpreting the relative importance of finanical aid in the enrollment decision, however, is difficult. Murphy (1981) and Spies (1978) assert that academic quality is more important to students than the cost of attendance. Conversely, Suttle (1983) reports that the Yale's yield

rate for middle income students has been declining, while the rates for high income and low income students have been increasing. Suttle suggests that this may be because these students can no longer afford Yale, while the high income students can afford Yale at any price and the low income students qualify for large amounts of aid. Such findings would suggest that the relationship between choice, quality, and price is sensitive to a number of variables and may not lend itself to easy generalizations. These findings do show that the type and amount of scholarship aid can have an impact on student matriculation.

Along with net price, as suggested by D. Chapman, the nature of college communication strategies have an effect on the matriculation decision. Freeman (1984) analyzed the effectiveness of "no-need" scholarships on college choice among a sample of midwest colleges. The results show that the "courtship" procedure utilized in making these awards may have actually been more important than the amount of the awards. Geller (1982) also examined the effectiveness of various types of marketing literature. His study reveals that students have a clear preference for some forms of material over others. A 1984 College Board report notes that 36% of all students participating in the Board's Student Search program applied to 1-3 of the colleges they learned of from this service. Communication strategies can influence the choice phase.

Perhaps the most important conclusion for discussion in this third stage is the limited impact most colleges and universities can have upon this phase. Since the typical choice set for over half of all

students taking the American Freshman Survey is 1-2 institutions (Astin, et al., 1984, p. 46), many potential educational options have already been eliminated. In fact, Litten, Sullivan, and Brodigan (1983) report that among Carleton applicants, these students will generally choose their first choice institution.

Summary

Student college choice is complex. Much like the image of a funnel used to describe the college admissions process, student college choice might be seen as a funnel, in which each high school student begins by considering a wide variety of post-high school options. These options become increasingly specific until a choice set is formed. The funnel then comes to a point, where the student makes the matriculation decision. During the predisposition phase there is little direct interaction among students and institutions of higher learning. The phases of search and choice, however, are characterized by increasing amounts of interaction between the student and institutions. Understanding student college choice has obvious utility for marketing efforts intended to influence student choice. In addition, it provides a mirror for colleges and universities to see themselves as others view them - an instructive exercise for all institutions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, K., & others. (1978). Status composition and educational goals: an attemet at clarification. Washington D.C.: National Institute of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 160 537)

Astin, A., et al. (1984). The American freshman: National norms for fall 1984. Los Angeles: American Council on Education and University of California at Los Angeles.

Bishop, J. (1977). The effect of public policies on the demand for higher education. Journal of Human Resources, 5 (4), 285-307.

Chapman, D. (1981). A model of student college choice. Journal of Higher Eudcation, 52, 490-505.

Chapman, R. G. (1984). Toward a theory of college choice: A model of college search and choice behavior. Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta.

Conklin, M. E., & Dailey, A. R. (1981). Does consistency of parental educational encouragement matter for secondary students? Sociology of Education, 5 (4), 254-262.

Dugan, D. J., Corazzini, A. J. & Grabowski, M. L. (1972). Determinants and distributional aspects of enrollment in U. S. higher education. Journal of Human Resources, 1, 26-38.

Elliott, W. F. (1980). Financial aid decisions and implications of market management. In J. B. Henry (Ed.), New directions for institutional research: The impact of student financial aid on institutions. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Freeman, H. B. (1984). The impact of "no-need" scholarships on the matriculation decison of academically talented students. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Higher Education, Chicago, IL.

Geller, W. (1982). How colleges respond to letters of inquiry: Is your mail effective. College and University, 57 (3), 307-313.

Green, K. C. (1982). The transition from high school to college: Aspirations, expectations, and realities. Paper presented at Midwest Regional Assembly of The College Board, Chicago, IL., February 1982.

Hansen, K. (1978). Individual demand for higher education: analytical report. Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 159 119)

Henry, J. B. (Ed.). (1980). New directions for institutional research: The impact of student financial aid on institutions. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc.

Ihlanfeldt, W. (1980). Achieving optimal enrollments and tuition revenues. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc.

Jackson, G. (1978). Financial aid and student enrollment. Journal of Higher Education, 49, 548-574.

Jackson, G. (1982). Public efficiency and private choice in higher education. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 4 (2), 237-247.

Kohn, M.C., Manski, F., & Mundel, D. (1972). A study of college choice. Paper presented at the North American Regional Meeting of the Econometric Society.

Kolstad, A. (1979). The influence of high school type and curriculum on enrollment in higher education and post-secondary training. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Conference.

Litten, L. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student choice. Journal of Higher Education, 4, 383-402.

Litten, L., Sullivan, D., & Brodigan, D. (1983). Applying market research in college admissions. New York: The College Board.

Making it count: A report on a project to provide better financial aid information to students. (1978). New York: The College Board.

Manski, C. F., & Wise, D. A. (1983). College choice in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Murphy, P. E. (1981). Consumer buying roles in college choice: Parents' and students' perceptions. College and university, 57, 140-150.

Packer, J. (1980). Student aid and student need on campus. In J. B. Henry (Ed.),

New directions for institutional research: The impact of student aid on institutions. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Peters, W. B. (1977). Fulfillment of short-term educational plans and continuance in education -- National longitudinal study of high school seniors. Washington, D. C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Stern, G. G. (1965). Myth and reality in the American college. American Association of University Professors Bulletin, 52, 408-411.

Suttle, L. J. (1983). The rising cost of private higher education. Research in higher education, 18 (3), 253-270.

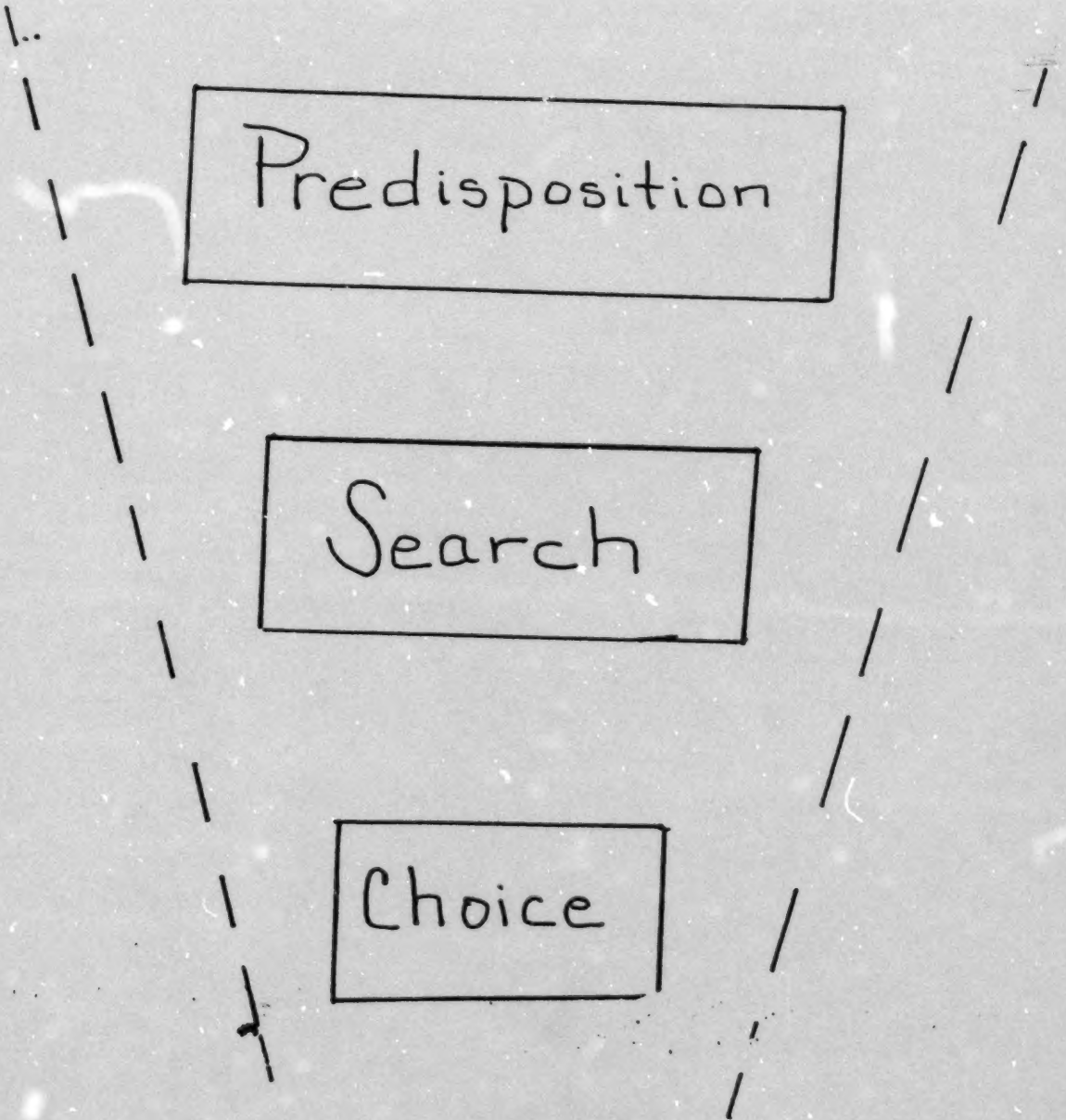
The American freshman: National norms for fall 1984. (1984). Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program.

Tierney, M. (1980). Student college choice sets: Toward an empirical characterization. Paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Trent, J. (1970). The decision to go to college: An accumulative multivariate process. Washington, D. C.: Office of Education.

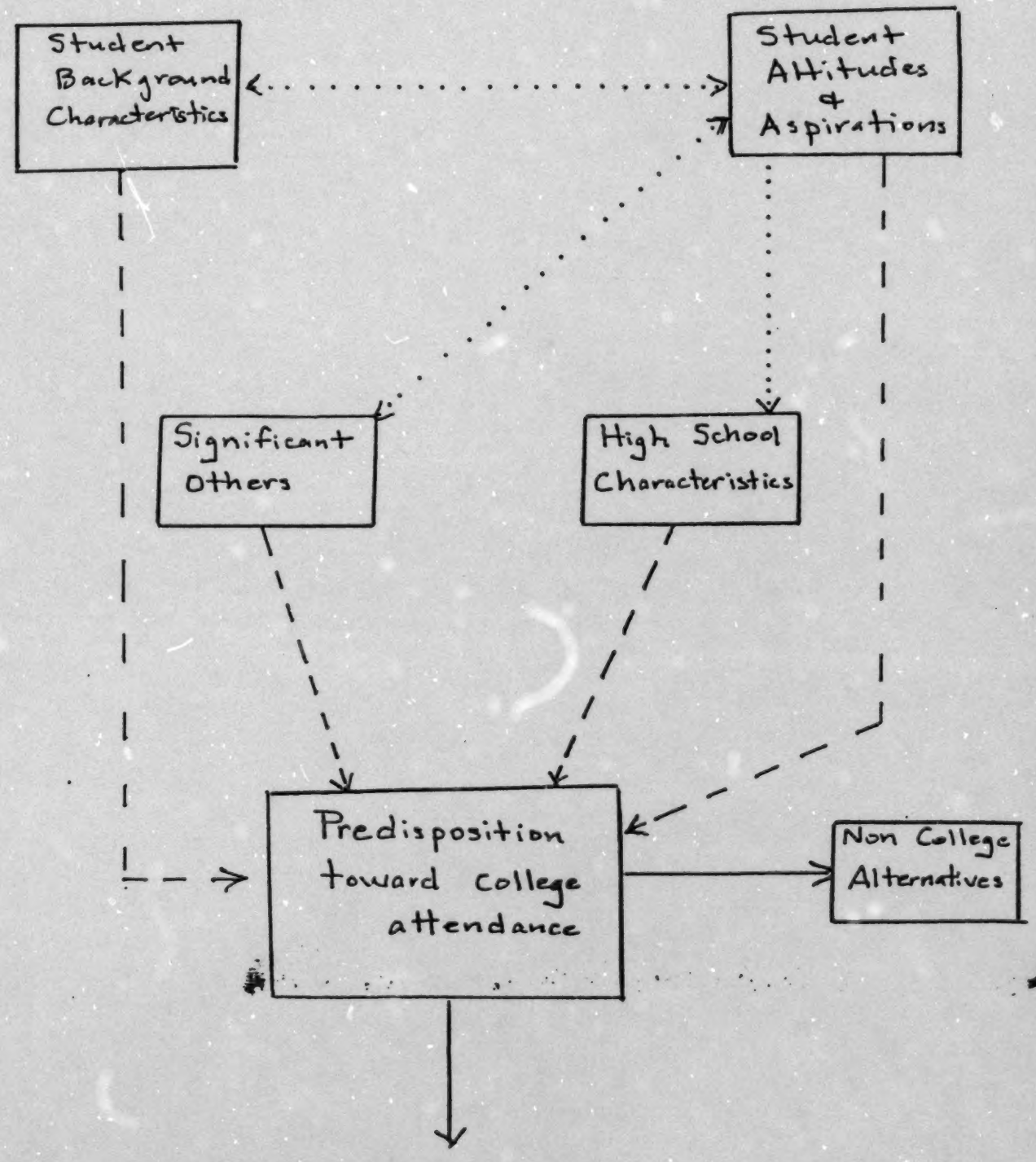
Zemsky, R. & Oedel, P. (1983). The structure of college choice. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Three Stage Choice Model



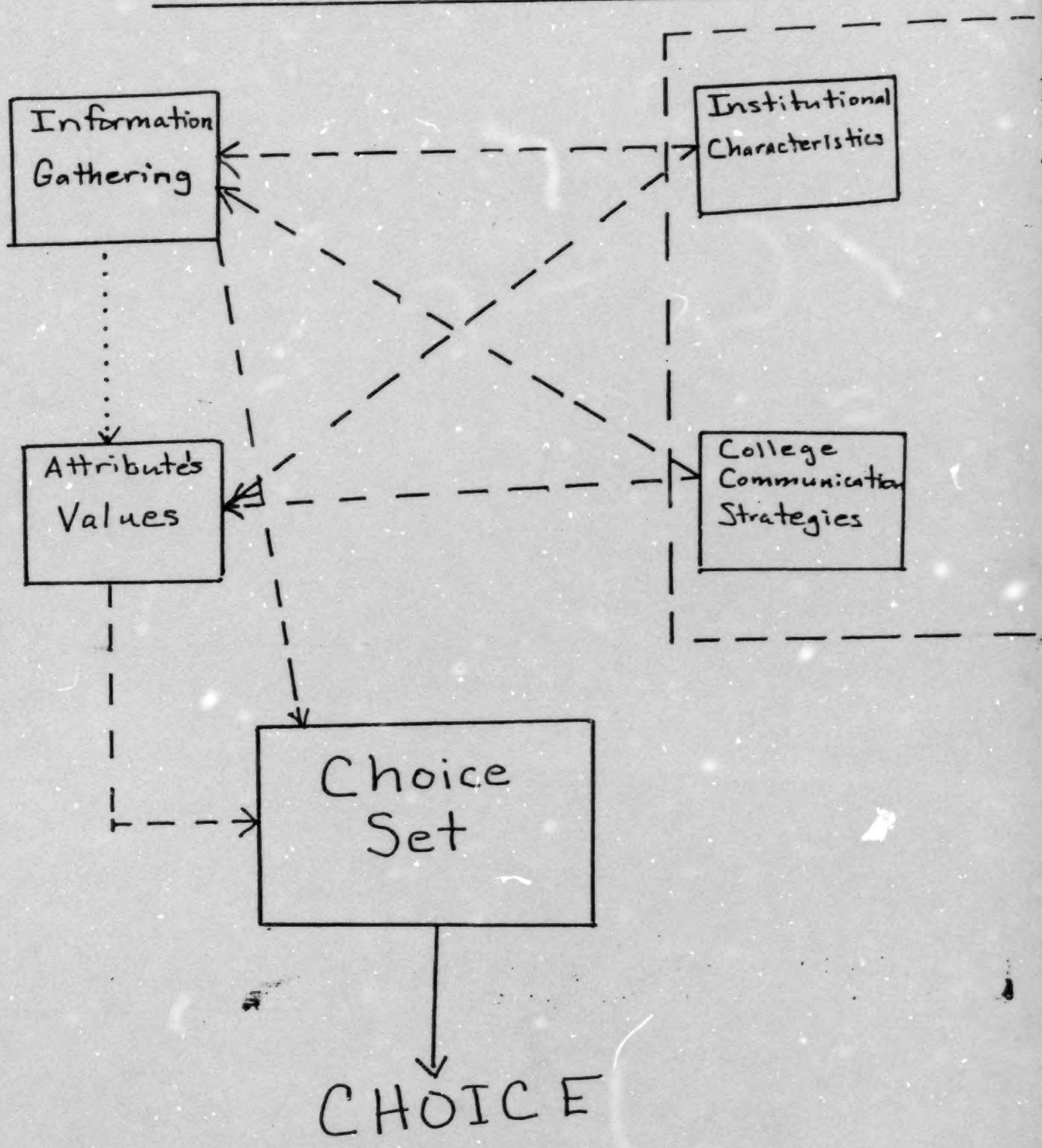
Phase I:

Predisposition



Phase II

Search



Phase III

Choice